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Abstract

Using collaborative autoethnography (CAE), the presented thesis explores the friendship of four women of color attending a school psychology graduate program. Friendship is presented as a protective factor with particular relevancy for women of color, and for racially- and ethnically-minoritized (REM) students attending graduate school. Researcher-participants utilized a concurrent approach to CAE, and data collection methods included journal entries and recorded conversations between researcher-participants. Relevant themes identified using emergent thematic coding included the meaningful characteristics of friendship, as identified by researcher-participants, as well as skills and actions identified as being influenced by friendship. Key ideas discussed include the meaningfulness of psychological safety, social support, reciprocity, humor, and joy in the friendship being explored, as well as the perceived benefits of this friendship on the behaviors, cognition, and skill set of the researcher-participants. Lastly, regarding implications for future research, researcher-participants discuss the meaningfulness of having cohorts of women of color, or intentional space provided for community and connection between women of color, in programs in which they are historically underrepresented.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography, friendship, relationships of women of color, psychological safety, social support, attrition

Too Much Fun: A Collaborative Autoethnography Detailing the Significance of Friendship Between Women of Color in a School Psychology Graduate Program

> Subalternity is less an identity than what we might call a predicament, but this is true in very odd sense. For, in Spivak's definition, it is the structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed. To the extent that anyone escapes the muting of subalternity, she ceases being a subaltern. (Morris, 2010, p. 8)

> And of course I am afraid, because the act of transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said "Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside." (Lorde, 1978/2012, pp. 42)

> No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think—to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep. (Hurston, 1928, as cited in Edim, 2021, pp. 182)

> I've had enough
>
> I'm sick of seeing and touching
>
> Both sides of things
>
> Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody
>
> Nobody
>
> Can talk to anybody
>
> Without me
>
> Right? …
>
> Forget it
>
> Stretch or drown
>
> Evolve or die
>
> The bridge I must be
>
> Is the bridge to my own power (Rushin, 1981, pp. lvii-lviii)

In their 2014 article, Tuck and Yang discuss the power of *refusal* in research, and posit that refusal, in the context of social science research, is much more than saying *no*. Instead, the authors present refusal as a means of agency, activism, and anticolonialism, stating:

> Refusal, and stances of refusal in research, are attempts to place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can't be known. (pp. 225)

Accordingly, though it may seem odd, we[1] choose to introduce our research by identifying our purpose through a lens of *refusal*, as a means of assertion and ownership of this research. We choose to introduce our research topic by stating why we write, and, when considering the work of Tuck and Yang, recognize the equal importance of acknowledging reasons why we do not write.

The proposed research provides the opportunity for storytelling of the lived experiences of the researcher-participants. We are four women of color (WOC) and students in a school psychology graduate program at a predominantly white institution (PWI). We propose to present our shared story of friendship through collaborative autoethnography (CAE), a methodology described by its creators as "a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data" (Chang et al., 2016, pp. 23). We acknowledge that we represent a minority within the graduate school community; we acknowledge that our stories are part of a tome often looked over. We write to be heard. We write to aid those with similar backgrounds in feeling heard. We write as a means of exploration, as an act of activism and self-care, and as a method of pushing forth our own personal and professional identity development.

We do not write, however, to explain. We do not write to introduce. We engage in the act of refusal by negating to present statistics related to the need for such research. We do not write to inform, or to convince anyone of anything. Instead, we write for those who acknowledge the presence of a problem, and for those who understand the complexity of the issue regarding the

[1] Though this thesis proposal is presented by a single researcher, first-person, plural language is used throughout the majority of this paper to best portray that this work is the product of a collaborative team of the researcher-participants. This is fitting with the goals of CAE and meant to be representative of equal contributions on the part of all participants.

lack of representation of women of color in research, graduate programs, and otherwise, in its entirety. We write for those who identify as being members of this population, and we write for mentors, advisors, and other advocates who have dedicated themselves to supporting these students. We write for ourselves and acknowledge that we deserve the chance to explore and define our worlds through research, as posited by *constructivism*[2], in the same way white women and men have, historically, been afforded the opportunity to do. We write for our ancestors, who suffered needlessly and were robbed of their personhood by those seeking to hoard power. We write for future generations and for the cohort of students beneath us, to provide insight into our desires[3] and the possibilities of future research; the possibilities of research created for us and by us, should we take ownership.

We also write to celebrate. We write to celebrate each other, the existence of our friendship, and our immersion in sisterhood. We write to celebrate the fact that we have found each other and used each other's support as a means of survival. We write to describe the phenomenon of friendship between women of color, its unique qualities, its innate creativity, and the beauty in its necessity. We write to name the injustices we have encountered, together. We write to detail our acts of resistance. We write to turn the light on conversations only had behind closed doors, in safe places. We make *this* research a safe place by refusing to explain or defend. We write for us. We write for those who came before us. We write for those who will come after.

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[2] Constructivism is defined here as an approach to research acknowledging that the goal of the research is to uncover participants' subjective truths, standing in opposition to approaches positing that research should strive for objectivity. This approach is thought to distribute power more evenly to research participants, especially those participants not falling into the majority population.

[3] Tuck (2009) introduces desire-based research, focusing on "understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives," (pp. 416) as a response and remedy to damage-based research, which historically, focuses on exploring pain narratives, deficits, etc. when discussing disenfranchised research populations.

Positionality[4]

The selection of the particular protective factor explored in this paper (i.e., friendship between WOC) is in no way accidental. In fact, this choice may instead be most accurately defined as the culmination of twenty-something years' worth of meticulous self-reflection. In the same way, this proposal as a whole, might be considered a summative response to questions I had never been asked before attending a predominantly white institution (PWI), and accordingly, had never thought to prepare answers for: "How are you adjusting? Are you satisfied with your experience here? What supports do you have in place?" I have never been good at thinking of answers to unexpected questions on the spot, and accordingly, always found it easiest to respond with general, blanket statements; never technically lies, but not at all full truths, either: "It's okay. I'm fine. I like it here." The only wholly honest statement that I think I have ever been able to present without pause, in reply to these probes, is my most frequent response to the last question listed, which references *supports*: "I've made some really good friends."

The friends I refer to in this answer are three of my classmates, the three women with whom I author this thesis. We spend a great deal of time together and have since we began our program. We live together and go to class together, have introduced the others to our respective families, and have fallen apart together and built ourselves back up together, too. When I return from advising meetings, still feeling the lingering guilt of millions of half-truths told, these are the friends I share full truths with; it is with them that I share what I might have said before, to answer the questions of well-intentioned, but painfully probing, faculty:

"I am adjusting fine, I guess, but I hate that this is a question, and I hate that I know that racism has always existed and will continue to exist, because acknowledging this hurts more here

[4] The *Positionality* subsection of this paper is written to represent solely the positionality of the principal researcher, and, accordingly, is written in first-person singular.

than it did when I attended my alma mater, a historically black university (HBCU). Experiencing racism hurts more here, at a PWI, and I know why, and you know why, so why do we have to talk about it? I experience racism in small and persistent ways, in microaggressions and colorblindness, and maybe that would be alright—it's nothing new—but here, I experience racism at the hands of professors tasked with teaching 'diversity, equity, and inclusion,' but what does all of that even mean? The only answer to racism is intentional anti-racism, and constant critical thinking, and the allotment for honesty, all of the time, but there is no way that we can ever have that conversation because I don't feel that I can tell you the truth, and even if I did, I would be risking much more than you by being honest, and I have to consider that before saying anything. I have to be very careful and think very hard about saying or doing anything all of the time, here, because it is very important for me, as a member of a racial minority, to do well in this program, because if I fail, I fear you will use it as a justification to deny access to people who look like me, and what's even worse is that I fear you might do that without even understanding what you are doing.

"I hate that I feel the need to lie to you and I hate that I am so often mildly angry with professors who are well-meaning and very nice people who are simply mistaken, and I hate that sometimes I tell the truth without meaning to, and I hate that I find myself apologizing without meaning to, after. I will probably apologize at the end of this. Please stop asking me questions that force me to lie. Please stop asking me questions with answers that will make you feel bad, because I will apologize for making you feel bad, even if I know that I should not. And anyway, I am adjusting fine, all things considered."

The beauty in delivering these answers to my friends is within the fact that I don't need to tell them any of it. They know already. They live it too. We have shared experiences that unite

us. I do not ever have to apologize for sharing things like this with them because they have already thought all of these things, too, and may have even shared the same ideas in our small group, said slightly differently, just last week. My friends and I say the same things over and over again to each other, which may seem ineffectual in theory, but is cathartic in practice. We tell each other the truth over and over again and share answers to questions that we have never answered honestly outside of our home. In fact, it is my opinion that the answers to the questions initially identified do not belong to the people asking (professors, advisors, etc.), in spite of the fact that the questions, and their askers, are all always vehemently well-intentioned. The answers to these questions, the real answers (not the canned responses delivered for the sake of my comfort, and my expectations of the comfort levels of the asker), belong to my friends and me, and our apartment: a physical manifestation of the safety we have built by finding each other. We tell each other the truth because it is safe to do so. We tell each other the truth because there is no fear of retribution when we share with each other. We tell each other the truth because we can.

Our relationship is characterized by *psychological safety*, and the honesty that comes with this safety, but it is characterized by plenty of other things, too. Our friendship is also, notably, characterized by fun. We have conversations about discontent and racism and the need for our continuous, unwavering activism, and then we sit down and watch TV and eat sushi and laugh so loudly that the downstairs neighbors come up to ask us to please quiet down. In a city where it often feels like we stand out like flies in buttermilk, we stand together and snicker and holler and laugh so loudly that we have been stopped and told on *two* separate occasions: “You all are just having too much fun!” This is a statement, but it always felt to me that there is a question implied here; an unspoken *how*, or a *why* in response to our breathless laughter. In this

way, it is like the way people react to us telling them that we spend all day together, almost every day: “Wow! It’s not common to find friends like that.” The question here is “How do you all do it? How do you spend so much time together and manage to stay friends?” while the question implied in the first statement might be, “What on earth could be so funny?” The answers to these two questions are the same, in essence. My friends and I do the things we do because we must. We laugh because we must, and because sometimes it feels like it is up to us to solve all of the problems we face and, well, no one ever solved anything by being miserable all of the time. We are together all of the time because we must be, because no one gets us like we get each other. We argue, but we make up and change for each other, too, because we must, because we are more than friends, because we are family, because we keep each other alive. These questions that are not necessarily questions perplex my friends and me, because the answers are clear as day, in our own eyes. We serve as each other’s protective factors. Our friendship allows for honesty and identity development that cannot exist in our everyday world, for the same reason that it is my first instinct to lie to a question as simple as, “How are you adjusting?” We do not always feel safe in the outside world, but we are always safe when we are together.

Theoretical Framework

We approach our research through the lens of *intersectionality*. Crenshaw (1989/2018) coined the term intersectionality, stating:

> Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they

> experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.
>
> Black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides. Yet the continued insistence that Black women's demands and needs be filtered through categorical analyses that completely obscure their experiences guarantees that their needs will seldom be addressed. (pp.149-150)

In summary, then, Crenshaw posits that the lived experiences of Black women are made up of more than the sum of their separate parts (i.e., Black identity and female identity). She suggests that to live as a Black woman is not to live a life involving the combating of sexism and racism, as two separate entities, but to experience an altogether different kind of persecution, not fully explained by either separate definition. This theory is later expanded and used in research to describe that those living at the intersection of multiple disenfranchised identities often have unique experiences, warranting independent research and definition of challenges and appropriate intervention, etc. (e.g., Ashlee et al., 2017).

Our research design builds off of this theory, and the idea that our experiences as women of color are unique. Our identities are separate and varied, and accordingly, our lived experiences are separate and varied, and deserving of being told as separate stories, though we also find purpose and utility in later connecting these stories in discussion (see discussion of CAE, in *Methodology*).

The following review of literature helps to further provide context for the proposed research through the lens of intersectionality. We first review research of factors related to the attrition and retention of students of color in similar areas of graduate study (e.g., school psychology and counseling psychology programs at the doctoral level), with a focus on social

support (or the lack thereof) being noted as a theme of particular relevance. We then explore literature related to the concepts of social support, psychological safety, and humor, and identity development particularly, as relevant themes identified in *Positionality,* and discuss the role of these findings as they might relate to our lived experiences and our unique needs as WOC. Lastly, we connect the information discussed in these sections and present how this information informed our study design, and the prompts for our collaborative autoethnographies.

Literature Review

Attrition and Retention of Students of Color in Graduate Study

In a 2022 review of literature, Proctor, a leader in research centering around the experiences of Black students in school psychology, discusses *critical race theory* (CRT)[5] and how aspects of this theory might be applied to the goals of recruiting and retaining Black people in school psychology, and to the goal of including Black thought in school psychology theory. Noted barriers to the field of school psychology for Black graduate students, as drawn from the body of literature discussed, included negative views on the field of school psychology and the negative impact of the field's complicities in deficit-based approaches and frames for Black children, lack of awareness, and fears that "their participation in school psychology would perpetuate, not help address, systemic and structural oppressions that take place in educational settings against African American students" (pp. 8).

Additionally, when exploring factors related to the retention of African American students in school psychology programs, as explored by qualitative research studies exploring attrition and retention, Proctor (2022) identified two themes particularly relevant to the proposed research: first, that Black students in school psychology programs suggested the need for support

[5] See Brown's 2021 article.

particularly during coursework and practical experiences that confront issues of race and racial injustices, and second, the highlighted importance of access to other people of color as members of support systems. Similarly, in a qualitative study focused on identifying and examining the protective factors present for Black counseling psychology doctoral students enrolled at PWIs, Elliott et al. (2021) identified (1) social support, both inside and outside of one's cohort or program, (2) the use of self-monitoring and self-care techniques (e.g., monitoring of engagement in conversations about race), and (3) the presence of self-motivating factors, as relevant themes. Notably, in relation to social support, participants identified the importance of expressed *empathy* and *understanding*. Additionally, researchers also identified the need for diverse curriculum and initiatives as a superordinate theme, specifically referencing a need for the recognition of the importance of diversity within the field, as well a need for the recognition of the contributions of psychologists of color. When considering this proposed research, it seems pertinent, or necessary, to identify parallels between these identified themes, and the discussed utility of our friendship.

When considering the information presented by Proctor (2022) and Elliot et al. (2021), we might assess that the simple presence of other WOC in our program makes our retention more likely, in the way that our existence supports the necessary acknowledgement that the voices and contributions of students of color should be celebrated within the field of psychology. We also think it pertinent to identify the possibility that the presence of more than one student of color in our cohort makes theorizing through a desire-based (vs. deficit-based) lens easier, or even the most *likely* path. These are both factors emphasizing the utility of our presence, or proximity, to each other, as a protective factor. Said differently, the presented literature and related theory suggest that the fact that we are allowed to exist in the same space might serve as a

protective factor all on its own, even before accounting for friendship and related factors. We go further and explore the idea of social support, and its unique qualities in relationships and friendships between women of color, below.

Social Support, Validation, and Psychological Safety, and Their Roles in Friendships

Psychological safety, as defined by Wanless (2016), describes "the feeling that taking interpersonal risks will not result in embarrassment, ridicule, or shame, [enabling] people to engage, connect, change, and learn" (pp. 6). This concept, founded in the research of Edmondson and Lei (2014), as explained by Wanless, posits that positive and safe relationships are not only characterized by feelings of trust and belonging, but also, notably, by limitations of risk and threats. While studying work relationships, Schulte et al. (2010), posit a reciprocal relationship between psychological safety and support seeking. Results of their ten-month longitudinal, quantitative study, including a participant group made up of 69 work teams, suggested that the more psychologically safe team members perceived their team to be, the more likely they were to ask their teammates for advice and to see them as friends. This relationship between safety and support seeking seems to be a concept transferrable to discussing friendships and may have particular relevance when discussing female friendship between WOC.

In looking at research exploring the relationships of Black women, which have merited some recognition for their unique qualities in comparison to the relationships of the majority, Goins (2011) identifies that to be a Black woman is to be doubly marginalized, and accordingly, acknowledges Black female friendships as being unique in the respect that they provide safe spaces, or reprieves, from racism and race-based discrimination, as well as sexism and misogyny. In her qualitative research, Goins explores the dynamics of two Black female friend groups through non-participant observation and describes these relationships as "safe

homeplaces," allowing for free discourse of seemingly combating themes (e.g., rejection and acceptance of otherness, or belongingness in the majority society vs. rejection of societal norms). Similar to a statement made in *Positionality*, Goins notes: "The females did not have to ask each other for details about these stories; instead, they were understood and felt because their friends have had similar experiences…The females' stories, embedded with discursive tensions, were validated and legitimated within their female friendship groups" (pp. 543).

A key takeaway from these articles, then, is that social support, though often explored as an important variable in all female friendships, cannot completely, or sufficiently explain the positive impacts of female friendship between women belonging to marginalized populations. Instead, when seeking to probe into the significance of a relationship like the one being explored in this proposal, it seems important to note the interplay between the concepts of *social support* and *psychological safety* in the female friendships of Black women and other WOC. Said differently, it may be accurate to assess that support cannot be provided without a stage for honesty, and freedom from the fear of being misunderstood, especially when considering the fact that Black women, and other women of color, experiencing marginalization on no less than two fronts, may experience this safety in more limited contexts than white men and women, and men of color.

Black Female Friendships and Humor and Positive Affect

The role of humor in friendship is a concept that has been less frequently explored than variables such as social support and belongingness. African American humor, however, is a topic that has warranted some theoretical and narrative/essay-form discussion in the areas of Black/African American studies, Humanities, and Leisure Sciences. For example, studies authored by Early et al. (2010) reflect on African American humor, acknowledging the

consideration that humor in the African American community might serve a role in minimizing pain and defeat, while also providing a medium capable of expressing grievance, grief, and allowing for the recognition of the "ludicrousness" of American race relations. Outley et al. (2021), discussing pandemic humor and *Black Twitter*, particularly, further acknowledge humor as an outlet for rage and discourse for African Americans, as well as a form of resistance and reappropriation. Bailey (2012) goes further, discussing the cultural relevance of African American humor and its existence since slavery and, though she discusses the role of humor as being an in-group therapeutic tool, she also identifies that this utility dissolves, or becomes significantly distorted, when humor is adopted by mainstream (or outgroup) populations.

In thinking about this discourse in respect to the current research, it seems important to acknowledge the role humor might play in conjunction with the other variables discussed: safety and support, and identity development. If considering humor a tool with cultural connections and specific relevancy in-group, as posited by the articles presented, then, when considering the role of humor within Black female friendships, it seems fair to assume that such humor would be unique, given the unique experiences of Black females. At the very least, when taken in part with the experiences and discussion presented in *Positionality*, it seems worthwhile to ponder how humor within these friendships might have unique qualities, or moderate healing in the way described: in a way that meets the particular needs of Black women and that cannot be replicated in other contexts.

Black Female Friendships and Identity Development

Intersectionality theory, discussed in the theoretical framework, has been referenced in many articles exploring Black female identity development. For example, this theory is used as a foundation for William et al.'s (2020) narrative inquiry exploring Black first-generation college

women's identity development, and in discussing key themes, researchers note that study participants (n=6) highlighted support structures as a tool used for coping with discrimination and institutional betrayal. In this study, each participant identified intracommunal support with Black women as being a resource aiding in processing experiences with discrimination and identity crises. A quote provided from one study participant, fitting with the narrative of this paper, describes the impact of this support, "I just, in a sense, sometimes I feel like when I'm talking to other Black women, they just understand me. I do not have to rectify my language…I can just be me and understood while I'm being me" (pp. 9).

In thinking about the proposed research, we might also explore professional identity, acknowledging that the idea that professional identity development is an essential aspect of many graduate programs of study, with school psychology being no exception. Indeed, in many classes, the final question posed in assignments is some version of the prompt: "What did this assignment mean for you? To you? What did you learn? How will you change going forward?" It is easy for us, as students, to answer these questions in our apartment. With a setting of psychological safety, we are free to ponder, to backtrack, to suggest and play with identity and ideas free from the threat of stereotypes and judgment. This carries over into the classroom; we complete assignments at home and present them to our classmates, but the ideas discussed and the information we present, has first been refined through discussion with the other members of our sisterhood. Without this safe place, or home base for play and development of ideas, it seems that we might have much different experiences. It is unbelievably difficult to think about higher-level concepts when stripped of the feeling of safety. We then argue that friendship and the safety it provides might also be related to the creation of our professional identities, a crucial aspect of our program of study.

Summary and Implications

In summarizing the ideas presented in this review of literature, we identify a few key themes. The first is that the simple *presence* of other people of color in a school psychology program has been explored in qualitative research as being linked to retention (Proctor, 2022). Proctor (2022) also suggests that social support and relationships are important for encouraging the retention of Black school psychology students, in particular. Expounding upon this second idea, and discussions of the topics leading up to the presented *Positionality* section, we explore three key themes: psychological safety, humor, and identity development. Research related to these three areas, as explored through a multidisciplinary lens, does indeed support the idea that there are unique aspects of the relationships of Black women and women of color that lend to these areas. Going forward, then, we hold these ideas at the center of the conversation, when discussing the selected prompts for CAE (described below) as well as the methods taken for analysis of journal entries/prompt responses.

Methodology

Our shared goals in orchestrating and presenting this research, as highlighted in the introduction of this proposal, are diverse. We hope to accurately portray our lived experiences, and in doing so, hope to legitimize these experiences for students with similar experiences. We hope to gain a better understanding of ourselves, our own growth, and future areas where personal growth might take place, in the hopes of becoming diligent, critical practitioners and contributors to the fields of psychology and school psychology. We also hope to contribute to the design of training programs in our field of study, and aim to expand upon the understanding of, and research centered on, the experiences of students of color, their needs as students, and the ways in which these needs often are and are not met in predominately white institutions and

majority-white training programs. Our related research questions, corresponding with the journaling prompts provided later in *Instrumentation*, are:

1. How might the friendship between the researcher-participants best be characterized, as described in accounts of lived experiences through collaborative autoethnographies?
2. What protective factors are present within the friendship described?
3. What implications do the researcher-participants foresee their friendship as having on their future professional work as school psychologists?

Participants

We write under the names Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter: four parts of a whole. Below we describe ourselves, briefly, at the time of writing:

Spring is a 24-year-old Latinx woman, identifying as cisgender and bisexual. She is a first-generation graduate student, the daughter of immigrants, and is bilingual. Her mother is from Honduras and her father is from El Salvador. She has research interests regarding uplifting the voices of Latinx students, intergenerational trauma, and bilingual assessments.

Summer is a 24-year-old Caribbean American neurodivergent woman, identifying as cisgender and heterosexual. She was raised in environments where 90% of the population was white, which has fueled social anxiety and trouble fitting in. Her research interests include construction of identity for individuals with disabilities and intersectionality.

Autumn is a 23-year-old African American woman and HBCU graduate, identifying as cisgender and a lesbian. She serves as the principal researcher in regard to the production of this research as a thesis, though we hope to co-publish this research, together, later, having identified

as equally contributing researcher-participants. Autumn's research interests center around intersectionality, Black femininity, and friendship.

Winter is a 26-year-old African American Muslim woman who identifies as cisgender and heterosexual. She is the daughter of converts to Islam and was raised in a tight-knit Muslim community. She is a first-generation graduate student whose research interests include diversity and inclusion practices in public school systems.

Study Design

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE), the methodology of this project, describes a qualitative data collection technique identified by Ashlee et al. (2017) as "an act of resistance" (pp. 91). Indeed, originators of this research approach Chang et al., (2016) present CAE methodology as one that enhances the principles of self-exploration and exploration of society present in autoethnography with collaboration and discussion, stating, "at the same time, the combination of multiple voices to interrogate a social phenomenon creates a unique synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation" (pp. 23). CAE commonly describes a process of self-reflection, taking form as responses of group members (i.e., *researcher-participants)* to a set of prompts crafted by the group members, relating to their shared experiences. This self-reflection is followed by a stage of group reflection and discussion. Further research supports the view that CAE is not simply a data collection method, but a reorientation of research tradition, founded in theory and intended to break the mold set by the majority culture, sharing similarities with the concept of *refusal,* as presented earlier (e.g., Acker & Millerson, 2018; Ashlee et al., 2017, Spitzner & Meixner, 2021).

Chang et al., (2016) emphasize the iterative nature of CAE, and its allowance for returns to previous steps of the research process at any time. Additionally, they identify five main

benefits of CAE: "(1) collective exploration of researcher subjectivity; (2) power-sharing among researcher-participants; (3) efficiency and enrichment in the research process; (4) deeper learning about self and other; and (5) community building," (pp. 25). It is our belief that we have goals aligning with Chang (2013) who, in addition to the previously noted benefits of CAE, describes that an understanding of culture, or aspects of society, may be achieved by examining the self, or by evaluating one's own experiences, their places within a larger picture, and the ways in which the existence of one's experiences, when considered with experiences of others, might define, shift, or change the society they take place within. Our goals also highlight the importance, and contribution of, collaboration in the exploration of a phenomena. A key theme of the proposed research, as established by the prompts provided below in *Instrumentation*, is that our existence in each other's lives has shifted our learning experiences and professional trajectories. It then seems fitting, or necessary, for this principle to be applied to the methodology of research that we hope will provide an accurate portrayal of our friendship.

Procedure

We chose to take a *concurrent* approach to this CAE (Chang et al., 2016). The process for journaling and discussion of journal entries was as follows: (1) the first prompt was presented to all four contributors, (2) journaling was completed individually, (3) contributors met to present, discuss, and revise their journal entries, in an audio-recorded session, (4) preliminary patterns apparent in responses were discussed by all four researcher-participants and related codes were generated, and finally, (5) the next prompt was presented, with any relevant changes or additions being made, based on discussion and group consensus. These steps were cycled through three times to collect responses to three prompts, with the full data collection cycle equaling about a year's time. The term *journal entries* here, was presented as to describing any

multimedia-form of response to the given prompts. For example, entries could include written, narrative responses, annotations and commentary of quotes or literature, music, art pieces, etc. In allowing for diversity of response formats, we hoped to best (and most accurately) capture and define the concept of *friendship*, and related themes, ideas, and theories.

Instrumentation

As a group, we identified three journaling prompts during the study design phase. These prompts relate back to our core reasons for inquiry, noted in the introduction, as well as the research questions identified in *Instrumentation*.

1. How do you define friendship? What role does it currently play in your life? How has this definition and role changed in the past year, and been impacted by your recent experiences as a school psychology graduate student, and otherwise?
2. What needs (physical, emotional, social, cognitive, etc.) are met by this friend group, in particular? How have these needs been shaped by your role as a nonwhite graduate student at a predominately white institution and your experiences as such? In what ways does friendship (conceptually and concretely) lend to the ideals of activism, autonomy, and agency?
3. How has this friendship shaped, defined, or framed your learning experiences as a school psychology graduate student? How have friendship and your relationships within this group, and with other women of color, contributed to your professional identity and perception of and expectations for your future role as a school psychologist?

Each of these prompts were delivered to researcher-participants as written above. While no edits were made to these questions, we began the research process with an acknowledgment that these questions were intended to serve as starting points, and, in fitting with the recursive and iterative

nature of a concurrent approach to CAE, also recognized the value of flexibility and the potential need to edit or replace these prompts, as deemed necessary, at any given point in the research process, or as relevant themes (and perhaps, questions) emerged during preliminary, informal analysis.

Analysis

Emergent thematic coding, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used for analysis of data. Braun and Clarke present six steps of thematic analysis, acknowledging the opportunity for flexibility in following these steps, and providing allowances for recursive and iterative data analysis. The six steps of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, are as follows:

1. Familiarizing yourself with the data,
2. Generating initial codes,
3. Searching for themes,
4. Reviewing themes,
5. Defining and naming themes, and
6. Producing the report.

To further support the collaborative nature of our method of inquiry, steps 1 and 2 were completed with participation of all four researcher-participants during the group discussion phases taking place after each prompt. Accordingly, then, as noted within the procedure section, researcher-participants were provided the opportunity to engage in a preliminary orientation of data analysis. The primary researcher-participant, Autumn, took lead in examining final themes, as described by steps 3 through 6, involving a process that included the utilization of the group-created draft of codes to identify potential themes. These themes were then reviewed against the

identified codes, defined, named. Additionally, final themes were reviewed by all four researcher-participants during the editing and review process of this paper.

Trustworthiness

We identify that the chosen methodology, CAE, is one which lends itself to several issues of trustworthiness. Firstly, the proposed method and study design coincide with the term *thick description*, which involves qualitative inquiry not only including observation, but also requiring the provision of explanation, in the forms of context and description of circumstance provided by participants, in such a manner that allows for expected transferability (Mills et al., 2010).

In thinking about truth, validity, and credibility, we also acknowledge that concurrent CAE is a method designed in a way that incorporates triangulation[6], or the collection of data that has been checked against and compared to data collected through different methodologies, or from other sources (i.e. participants), as a necessary part of the data collection process. Our research utilized triangulation in two separate ways: first, by allotting for the presentation of ideas on the part of the researcher-participants both in journal prompts and in discussion, and secondly, by allowing all four researcher-participants to discuss and compare our described lived experiences with each other. We also initiated this research project by agreeing to uphold disagreement as a mark of increased trustworthiness, and acknowledged, proactively, the importance and validity of diversity in our lived experiences, while welcoming discord and the opportunity for discussion in areas on which our opinions differ.

Findings

We have divided the findings presented below into two broad themes derived from the primary researcher-participant's thematic analysis of completed journal entries written by

[6] see (Krefting, 1991).

researcher-participants and conversations held between researcher-participants. The first of these themes focuses on *input*, or elements provided by friendship that have been identified as pouring into our development as women, as students and professionals, and as friends, family members, and lovers. The second of these themes focuses on *output*, or ways in which the identified input factors are believed to impact our perceptions, appraisals, and actions. Said analogically, *input* is to the stage provided for development by friendship, as *output* is to the production put on as we move throughout the world as individuals and partners, or team members.[7] The sections below are titled accordingly (i.e., stage and production).

Regarding formatting and presentation of prompt responses, quotations are provided below and reflect the exact words of researcher-participants as recorded in writing, or as reflected in discussion audio recordings. Additionally, we note that researcher-participants sometimes responded to prompts with multimedia elements including gifs, photographs, and audio recordings. In efforts to assure confidentiality, these elements are not included directly in this paper, though these elements were discussed by researcher-participants as components journal entries.

The Stage

> "…friendship is where you go to be who you are and be loved for it." ("Summer")[8]

In the review of literature, we identify and discuss several aspects of friendship as being important, or defining, characteristics of meaningful relationships. Included in these

[7] This comparison may be further contextualized by research on *dramaturgy* (Goffman, 1956), and *reciprocal determinism* (Bandura, 1978).
[8] Unless otherwise noted, all researcher-participant attributed quotations are taken from journal entries.

characteristics are the concepts of social support, psychological safety, and humor. While we did not select these characteristics with the intention of providing a standalone, exhaustive description of the factors that define friendship, we identified and set apart the described characteristics for their perceived relevancy and applicability. Furthermore, we posited that these characteristics may be defined and demonstrated uniquely within the relationships and friendships of women of color, as the needs of this population are specific to the demands outlined by our intersectional roles. In this way, we also propose a reciprocal relationship between the characteristics of our friendship and the demands related to our social roles and standing. Said differently, and in further support of the structure of the two themes identified in analyzing our findings, we work from an expectation that the demands of our lives impact the structure of our friendship, just as much as the structure of our friendship impacts the ways in which we move within the world, or perform as actors on a social stage. And, indeed, as reflected by journal entries, each researcher-participant described, in some way, the identified characteristics of social support, psychological safety, and humor as being significant, differentiating factors of the friendship held at the center of this research project, in comparison to other friendships and relationships. We also identified a few additional characteristics, such as *joy* and *reciprocity*, as being common threads discussed across entries written by different authors, and in response to multiple prompts. These characteristics are incorporated into the discussion below.

Social Support, Psychological Safety, and Love

Psychological safety, highlighted as a centering factor for our research, was a familiar concept and topic of a discussion for us by the time we began our first round of journaling, and accordingly, in our entries we sometimes referred to this shared expectation by name; however,

more frequently, we referred to psychological safety in a way that reflected our goal of providing a rigorous, honest definition of a concept that so often seems to serve as our truth-north, or as a point for reorienting and recentering. Accidentally, almost, our entries, altogether, support a three-dimensional view of *psychological safety*, as we described how it looks in our friendship, how it feels to be on the receiving end of both deliberate and indeliberate nonjudgment, and how it feels to walk into a room and know it is missing. For example, we consider a quotation provided by Winter:

> Over the past two years, I've learned that friendship is being able to share your full self with your chosen people, especially the ugly parts, without fear of judgment. Friends, to me, are those people I go to for reassurance, validation, and a laugh when I need to share thoughts and feelings that I wouldn't be comfortable sharing with anyone else, even family. The right friends can understand where I'm coming from and relate to my experiences with an ease and lightness that can sometimes be hard to find in people, and which is usually exactly what I need to find ease and lightness in whatever it is that I'm dealing with. ("Winter")

This quotation highlights our organically-occurring pursuit to describe psychological safety by describing all that it is. Concretely, we defined psychological safety as being inclusive of actions and efforts of reassurance, validation, and humor. "I honestly have never felt so validated by a friend group before," wrote Spring. "I thank you all so much for this." We also identified that validation takes a different form when we are together, and discussed that *laughter*, or the initiation of humor in response to support seeking, specifically occurring within our friend group, has particular value, and may very well be reflective of the line between empathy and sympathy (i.e., "I am right here with you," vs. "That is such a terrible thing to have happened to you.").

Regarding the sensations, or sensory experiences, feelings, and states, associated with psychological safety, the words "ease" and "lightness" were utilized by Winter. Similarly, Spring identified that "friendship is a safe, nonjudgmental space." This definition includes a description of actions related to friendship, in identifying the provision of a setting for sharing, free from judgment, but it also identifies the need for space.

We further discussed the concept of *space* in later conversation and landed on a definition overarching both the external and internal capacities of space, as well as cognitive and sensory, physical extensions of space. "Physical closeness when we're together…[creates] a safe space within the classrooms that we enter together," wrote Summer. Relatedly, we identify in discussion that space is the car that we rode in together on the way to class, and space is an empty rug and a coffee table pushed aside in the apartment we previously shared. Space is also a feeling of ease, which is always a feeling that is hard-earned and highly valued because of who we are, and the obstacles we encounter daily. "I get in the car with my roommates at the end of the day and exhale with shaking hands," wrote Autumn. "Experience tension lifting from my shoulders, sick feelings subsiding." Space was also described as togetherness, and a related feeling of safety by Spring, who wrote, "I don't think I would've felt comfortable attending a large social event or going to the bar without one or all of you. It wouldn't have been as fun and…I wouldn't have felt as safe." Comfortability and ease, then, we discuss, serve as activism and fuel. Similarly, psychological safety serves as an activist tool, perhaps especially when it is intentionally, mindfully carved out and tended to by those depending on it, in the way that we do. And, by extension, then, our friendship is activism, too.

In addition to broad discussions of *psychological safety,* in our journal entries, we also each wrote about aspects of social support, and of reciprocity—give-and-take that levels out to

become even, in the end. Funnily enough, this also describes the way in which we handle money as a group (e.g., "Don't worry about paying me back! We'll be passing the same $10 around for the rest of our lives if we try and keep track of every little thing."). Spring wrote that friendship is "…being there for someone through the highs and lows. It's a relationship, and it's a two-way street." Similarly, Summer described friends as, "those who care for you, build you up and treat you like family even though you aren't…" And, in connecting with previously established definitions of *love*, in discussion, we landed on a functional definition of love as a verb, as opposed to a noun. We describe love, now, by describing commitment, attention, choice, and action. And, in just the same way as the practice of extending psychological safety continuously, persistently and ceaselessly loving each other, or valuing each other *in action*, doubles for radical activism in a world that so often suggests that we are unlovable.

> I go into the world with a definition of love fortified by bell hooks[9] (*All About Love* is a reading recommendation provided by Winter), focused on commitment and work and dedication to a person and their own growth and actualization. I want my friends to be their best selves. I appreciate so many things about them, enough that I feel confident in centering my thesis on the love that circulates between us. ("Autumn")

Humor and Joy

As a group, we know *joy* well. We invite her into every room and show her off as our proudest accomplishment. Despite this familiarity, our experience completing this research project suggests that joy and humor are both, perhaps, things that are difficult to conceptualize and contextualize in writing, and accordingly, this section is founded largely on discussion, as opposed to written journal entries. In this vein, we choose to introduce the topic of humor and

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[9] See (hooks, 2000)

joy with a spoken quote from Summer: “It’s like when we’re hanging out and all I can think about is how much I want to do this again…and you’re so happy, you want to burst!”

We are a group educated in *mindfulness,* so when Summer says this, it was second nature for us to halt the conversation and give this phrasing space and acknowledgement, for us to stop to giggle, to say, ‘*ooh’* and snap our fingers at how delicious these words feel. We discussed how honest and accurate it is to describe our joy as bursting, or like the warm, sunny feelings of the colors yellow and orange, but in your chest, or the sizzling sound and fingertip-localized excitement attached to sparklers. And, in multiple sessions, we discussed the fun we had together without meaning to. Even more often, we slipped into having fun without meaning to, found ourselves joking and laughing and having to recenter in a way that does not translate easily to transcription. We talked about nothing, meandered through conversations about classes and internship, and the new people in our lives, and the places we want to travel after graduation. We talked about hard things, too. We talked about the challenges of transition, about missing each other, about being endlessly tired, and we laughed through these discussions in just the same way. Perhaps it is most accurate to say that the task of describing humor, for us, is as deceptively monumental as the task of describing water would be to a fish.

Humor is important enough that we each brought it up when defining friendship, and for this reason, we present it, now, as a crucial characteristic of the stage set by friendship, though we find ourselves unable, at the present time, to describe it in the inclusive, extensive way that we discuss psychological safety. Our writing suggests that, to us, humor simply *is,* or may serve as a natural follow-up to the safety we provide each other. Summer wrote that safety, “allows us to make friendly conversation or jokes in the classroom setting.” Regarding interactions outside of the classroom, Summer added, “I felt more comfortable going knowing [you all] would be

there or that we'd be going and leaving together. I never had to wonder if I would have a good time out…" And, of course, we can identify that we, at one time, lived extremely close, intertwined lives, and so perhaps it is intuitive to say that we find humor and joy in our shared experiences, or because of our similar backgrounds. But it feels like more than that, too, and we acknowledge this, as well. We acknowledge the sensations and imagery that come with humor, and with joy, by extension. We acknowledge the pleasant feelings associated with humor and joy which so frequently fill us to bursting. We also acknowledge that this kind of joy is unique to us and our friendship—we acknowledge that strangers only stop us in the street to inquire about the origin of our good mood when we are together. Perhaps this is a clear-enough definition. It is, by any case, certainly enough to identify that humor and joy are offsets of activism in the same way that the simple existence of our friendship is.

> The love that the people in this particular friend group have for each other and that I have for each of them is a huge source of relief, security, and joy in my life that definitely meets multiple needs. Physically, getting the chance to spend time with my friends laughing, yelling, talking, and sometimes crying are opportunities for me to completely relax and release stress with people who get it because they're probably dealing with similar feelings and are looking for people to safely share them with too, just like me. ("Winter")

The Production

This section could, alternatively, be titled "All of the Amazing Things Friendship Empowers Us to Do." This is a section for celebration of each other and our accomplishments, and for gratitude for our existence, our capabilities, our resiliency. Additionally, this section includes documentation of self-exploration. This section includes identification of the things we

require not only to thrive, but to simply *exist* within spaces that have historically denied us entry. This section includes a description of the needs set by the task of continuously striving for standards that were set for individuals who are not at all in our position, and are enforced by individuals who fail to understand and address the weighted implications of this—how *grand* a challenge it is to be women of color in graduate school. But, oh, how grand a challenge it is! To be a non-white woman, and a young adult, and a student, and a daughter, and a sister, and a caretaker, and a friend, and a lover, and, and, and. Even we sometimes find ourselves guilty of failing to acknowledge the sheer size of compounded, related expectations. Nevertheless, in time, the truth makes itself clear, again and again: activism is not a choice, for us. It is the title of our play. And this is because it is so frequently trailblazing for us simply to show up as we are, in the world, as a whole, and at an institution which would have denied access to each of us less than a century ago. It is then ground-breaking, reality-shifting for us to show up with laughter on our lips and joy bursting from our chests, knowing that we are undoubtedly deserving of safety, support, and love. Accordingly, then, this section could also be titled, "If You Are Going to Continue to Ask the World of Us, Then These Are the Things We're Going to Need."

Identity Development (The Personal)

Our journal entries, collectively, reflect that when discussing friendship, it is natural for us to discuss growth and change. This is perhaps one of the most exciting things about our friendship: the endless opportunity it presents for personal growth and life-long learning. As a group, we wrote and discussed positive, acquired things, such as skills that have been learned and habits that have been practiced extensively. Boldness, for example, was described by both Spring and Summer as a trait that has been built up throughout our friendship. Summer identified that this friendship "makes it easier for us to say what we want to say without fear," while Spring

wrote, “this friend group gave me the confidence to speak louder than I ever have before.” We then discussed that this perceived increase in boldness fits in neatly with our acknowledgement of the impact of psychological safety. More specifically, we identified that psychological safety has allowed for practice and experience sharing ideas in a way that extends beyond the classroom, and lessened our expectations of external judgment, which lessens feelings of anxiety and fear in a way that prevents them from growing into full-fledged barriers to learning, in the way that they otherwise could. Wrote Summer:

> I think that throughout the program I tried to keep reminding myself and others that there’s value in uniqueness and doing things differently, but…it’s hard not to compare yourselves or feel self-conscious for doing something differently than others. I do think that knowing you have a safe place to come home to and talk about the things you tried and what happened makes it feel a little easier to try taking control and trying something new or different. And you know that if it doesn’t work out, others will learn from it too…” (“Summer”)

Similarly, humor, joy, and social support were attached in conversation to groupwide, increased feelings of resiliency, particularly in the face of racial discrimination, or micro- and macroaggression.

> Not only did having this particular group of friends give me the feeling of home in an unfamiliar place, that sense of friendship and the security that came with it also gave me the courage to write and speak about the issues that mattered most to me within my academic career. In a conceptual sense, knowing that I had friends who always took my feelings and experiences as valid was such an encouraging facet that I wasn’t as afraid to

> speak my mind and share my perspective in other sectors of my life as well, such as the classroom or written assignments. (“Winter”)

Cognitive flexibility, defined here as both the willingness and ability to adapt to new patterns of thinking (and by extension, ways of being), was also identified as a valued, continuously-improving skill by Spring and Summer, and discussed by the group as being related to both psychological safety and expectations of reciprocity (e.g., “You always show up for me, so I recognize my own ability to do the same, and choose to exercise this skill now.”). In this way, we acknowledge that to participate in friendship means not only to benefit from the provisions of safety, support, joy, and other, identified characteristics of positive relationships, but to practice generating and providing these characteristics in relationships, as well. To be a friend in the way that we have defined requires work, effort, and mindfulness. The following quote provided by Summer highlights this idea:

> In the past year my definition of friendship evolved from being something to always go towards, to something that is important to find balance with. I’ve always felt that any opportunity to spend time with friends should be taken, but I realized (from being in school) that sometimes I can’t be a good friend if I don’t take time to take care of the long to do list growing in the back of my mind. Or I can’t be a good friend if I haven’t taken time to decompress first. (“Summer”)

Friendship demands us to care about ourselves and others radically, to identify and establish our boundaries, and to be aware of the way that we show up for others. In our experience, these relational gains made by participating in intentional friendship have been lasting and transferable, fitting with a description of friendship as being a stage for skill-building. This is in no way a new idea, and we do not present it as such, but we feel it important to acknowledge

given our extensive description of our friendship as being unique in what it requires, and what it provides.

Relatedly, then, the fact that we have not previously experienced friendships of this intensity seems particularly significant. As does the fact that we, as a group, have discussed the difficulty in frequently feeling like we are catching up on social and professional "soft" skills, and in continuously learning to demonstrate these skills without the negative influences of nervousness, or anxiety related to perception. "I expected to feel othered and unseen at times on a larger scale, so being part of a group of people who understood those experiences was something I always knew I would need," wrote Winter. As described in the previous paragraph, we identified in writing the immense individual growth that we have had in the time that we have known each other, but in verbal discussion also identified the fact that it can feel like we are changing quickly enough to ignite staggering, sometimes overly critical, self-awareness, and related growing pains characterized by states of overwhelm, self-doubt and worry, shame. In taking a step back, at the time of writing, we can acknowledge that this may very well be the plight of all twenty-somethings, or simply an unavoidable step in the process of self-change—shame is certainly not a feeling limited to us—but we also acknowledge that the world is much less kind to us, and provides us with much less representation, which makes it more difficult to achieve acceptance, in our own minds, when alone. It is not until now, in conducting this research project and examining ourselves and our friendship, that we fully and intentionally acknowledge an alternative to lingering vestiges of shame.

And so, we acknowledge, now, that we are women who have never been provided with relational stages strictly designed to ensure our genuineness. We have navigated relationships that have lots of good things, but not everything; we have been parts of ourselves, but not our

whole selves; we have worried in the past, too, even in times where we did not know enough to conceptualize this worry so aptly. So, we acknowledge, now, loudly enough and boldly enough for our inner children to hear—when we were provided with the opportunity to build a stage for ourselves, we did, and we thrived. Now that we have been given a context, safety—*space*—we thrive. On the stage we have built, on the stage we own, on the stage we carry with us and refuse to be removed from, we know ourselves. And we realize and we bend and we love and we soar. Wrote Autumn: "Accordingly, then, friendship is also a gateway, necessary passage. The first rung on a ladder. A tool for future success." This is an infinitely relieving realization. It feels like one that every person must deserve. Armed with this new knowledge, we move forward a greater understanding of the undefinably-immense *hope* embedded in our togetherness—the kind of hope large enough to inspire the joy that makes us stand out to strangers. We have questions that reach our tongue, bittersweet and mellowed by gratitude. They are questions that are fine left unanswered, but significant, all the same. *Who might we be, had we been provided access to this kind of friendship before? Who might we be if we had never been introduced to each other, at all?*

Professional Development (The Professional)

> When it comes to agency and activism, this friendship paired with the structure of our program gave me the confidence to say what I was feeling or to give constructive feedback on something that could be ameliorated. ("Summer")

At the time of writing this section, we approach the completion of a school psychology M.A./Ed.S. program that has given us many things to be grateful for. Though we have experienced challenges, as identified previously, we also feel it important to acknowledge that we have encountered university faculty members who ask questions because they value our

opinions loudly and undeniably. In the classroom, we were provided with content and instruction, but we were also pushed continuously to think for ourselves, to explore our own identity development, and to incorporate learned material into our lives. These are all factors that have made it possible for us to arrive here, posited at the center of research that feels innovative, freeing, and meaningful. Lastly, we would be remiss to fail to acknowledge that this program has given us each other, and in doing so, has provided us with something invaluable, with a friendship that functions as a tool for accessing learning, as our friendship empowers us to ask questions, to challenge the things we are taught and the things that we believe we know, to speak up when someone must, and to ask for more from others, when it is necessary. "Concretely, having friends such as these…who knew exactly what I was talking about and where I was coming from helped make my work in my graduate career more honest, relevant, and must easier to write," wrote Winter. This referenced honesty, in addition to previously discussed boldness and comfort in boldness, were discussed as tools for learning, and accordingly, tools for building great teams, schools, and programs, or for building ourselves into great (i.e., loving, kind, empathetic) individuals. These skills of challenging, speaking, and asking are necessary for making meaningful change. In the pulled quote provided above, written by Summer, she acknowledged both friendship and program structuring as vital influences impacting her own agency and activism.

In similar fashion, Winter discussed friendship and its impact on her current work within the school system, as well as the role of activism within her role:

> Part of the reason I got into school psychology was because I wanted Black students and other REM kids to see adults who looked like them in their school buildings and feel seen, appreciated, and unafraid at school…I want the kids I work with to feel like they

> can come to the school psychology office for more than [assessment], but with their problems, their stress, their boredom, their anger. To laugh, to cry, to be, to chat. For quiet, for peace, for acceptance, for connection. Just like I do with my friends who make the world feel safer for me. ("Winter")

Importantly, this quotation highlights perceptions of psychological safety. In verbal discussion, each of us identified similar experiences and goals, and as a group, discussed that, as school psychology interns, we walk into rooms as our full selves. We bring the skills practiced on the stage set by friendship. We bring active listening, patience, and psychological safety to interactions. We bring anticipation and initiation of lightness, ease, and humor. We acknowledge that we can be wrong. We acknowledge that others can be wrong, as well, and we acknowledge that this is not at all a bad thing—it is, instead, what makes teamwork beautiful—and we *know* this. We believe this so strongly because we have seen the growth that springs from being allowed space to provide wrong answers and receive correction, or a challenge to think from another person's perspective. Said Spring, in an audiological component of a journal submission, "I love being a lifelong learner. I enjoy being a lifelong learner, and I like that this friend group challenges me, and pushes me to be a lifelong learner…just in like, being a human being." And, as referenced by Winter, we identify that we hope to demonstrate the discussed skills and characteristics for REM K-12 students in our roles as educators, just as much as we hope to provide them with carved-out *space*.

The skills and characteristics of friendship identified in this research are noted to be tools of activism, in their own right, and accordingly, almost feel embedded in our DNA, given all of our practice in implementing them. We know these skills to be effective because of our own

interactions with each other, and because we know, truly, what it feels like to stand on a stage missing the things that make it safe and conducive to learning.

> Seeing my friends achieve and succeed within our field inspires me to do the same and renews my love for what we do by reminding me how the future of school psychology will be shaped by us and our contributions. I believe the work that each of us are doing is beautiful, important, and makes me want to be a part of it, too. ("Winter")

In our roles as educators, when asked to support student achievement, we acknowledge what we have learned both instructionally and experientially. We also frequently acknowledge that the rigor of our graduate education has been greatly enhanced by our social network, and by the fact that we had endless opportunity to work through theories conversationally, and to problem-solve as members of a group, and to be taught by each other, intentionally and unintentionally. Should we ever doubt ourselves—and we do, sometimes, in the same way that everyone does—it is easy to pick up the phone and ask for consultation and a new perspective, for advice that is sure to be empathetic and considerate, or simply for information that we are not quite sure of. In this way, our friendship continues to support our professional development ceaselessly.

"Would completing graduate school have been more difficult if we were on our own?" is a question we proposed during discussion. The answer to this question was easy for us to agree on—a resounding yes, absolutely—but the answers to follow-up questions were more difficult to find. Would completing graduate school have been possible, for each one of us, if we did not have each other? If we were forced to face our challenges without this version of safety and space, without endlessly regenerating joy, without friends who could always be trusted to listen, understand, and support, would we triumph? Probably. Yes, probably, because we are strong individually, too, as we must be, and because we have additional friends, and family, and support

structures. Should we have been challenged to complete graduate school without this kind of friendship, surely, we could have and would have persevered, as so many students-of-color in graduate study do. But we acknowledge, too, in leaning on familiar advice, that *could* is not the same as *should*. And why shouldn't we, and other students-of-color, and women-of-color, expect this degree of safety, wherever we go? Why shouldn't *we* expect to experience this degree of love? So, to conclude this section, we propose a question that seems to have shaped this research without our knowledge, a question that alludes to future avenues, a question that provides comfort when we hold it up to the light: Why would anyone ever expect women- and girls-of-color to succeed in isolation, or to do their best in places where they are the *only* ones, when this is an expectation society assigns to no one else?

Discussion

We conclude by addressing the research questions posed earlier:

1. How might the friendship between the researcher-participants best be characterized, as described in accounts of lived experiences through collaborative autoethnographies?
2. What protective factors are present within the friendship described?
3. What implications do the researcher-participants foresee their friendship as having on their future professional work as school psychologists?

To address research question one, we identify that our friendship is multi-faceted, unique, and life-giving. We characterize our friendship as being inclusive of psychological safety, social support, reciprocity, humor, joy, and *love* as an action word. Additionally, we describe friendship as providing a stage for vulnerability, for honest, and for identity and skill development.

To address research question two, we identify that our friendship has provided opportunity for the development of skills necessary to navigate personal and professional relationships, such as cognitive flexibility and resiliency, particularly in the face of stressors such as systemic- and individual-level discrimination. We also identify that during our time as graduate students, our friendship has fulfilled our needs for social support and perceived understanding. Moving forward, these are things that we expect and search out, in ways that feel thrilling and bold. Our friendship has also provided multiple opportunities for activism, as we identify that activism includes all occasions that we show up as our fullest, most honest selves, all occasions where we show up with joy, and all occasions where we support each other and our needs, where we love each other, where we fuel each other's growth and development.

To address research question three, we acknowledge that we believe our graduate academic careers have been substantially enhanced by our friendship and the fact that we have progressed through our program of study together. Our friendship has influenced our acquisition of knowledge and enhanced information delivered in the classroom and acquired from field experiences. We also acknowledge that the personal identity development and skill-building provided, inherently, by our friendship has impacted who we are at our cores, which impacts who we are as school psychology interns, and who we will be become as school psychologists. We hold center ideals such as patience and the provision of safety in a very personal way. We sometimes have strikingly different approaches to problem-solving than our co-workers, but this is okay, or even exciting, because we aim to move, always, with a foundation of love, understanding, and flexibility. Our ability to stay true to these values may be expected to reflect, in part, the on-the-job training provided by serving as friends to each other.

Additionally, in thinking of final conclusions and directions for future research, we propose the following summary points, or identified truths, that speak to our experience:

- Our friendship, a friendship made up exclusively of four women-of-color in graduate study, is unlike any friendship, or relationship, that we have known before.
- This kind of friendship informs us with a definition of *space* transcending physical limitations. Space is sometimes physical, but it can also be a feeling, or a relationship. Our friendship creates space in the way that we have defined. This space protects us and enables us to meet challenges head-on.
- We require space to be ourselves. We require space to examine ourselves. We require space to grow. We do not mean to suggest that this is a need specific to women-of-color. In fact, we argue the opposite. We expect that space is a necessity for identity development and growth for all individuals; however,
- We did not previously have the words, necessarily, to express the limitations we have felt, historically, navigating scenarios that do not provide space, or psychological safety. Now that we have the words,
- We acknowledge that *space* may be considered a signifier of whether or not a stage or relationship is optimized, to the degree that it allows for personal development and growth. We also acknowledge that we have, historically, been asked to perform on incomplete stages.
- We acknowledge that individuals belonging to the majority may have more often been provided access to full stages, which provide enormous space. These are relationships not marred by discrimination and stereotyping, or the expectation of these things. These are relationships which do not include imbalance, or fear. These are relationships where

individuals see eye-to-eye, and fully and *rightfully* expect to be understood, heard, and loved. Accordingly, lastly,

- We acknowledge that it has been harmful to our self-esteem and self-efficacy, in the past, to compare ourselves to standards set by the majority for personal and professional identity development. We have asked ourselves if we are stunted, if we are wrong, if there is something at our core that must be fixed, and we have decided that the answer is no, three times over. We simply require space, safety, and room to grow, in the way that all people do, but, historically, we have been given much less space than we need to be our best selves.

While these points are formed based on our own experiences, we suspect that our condition is not at all a unique one. We work in a career that allows us to work with the next generation. We also work in a career that is very heavily defined by comparison. School psychologists are charged with the task of holding children to standards set by educational systems, and the majority. Like all educators, we find ourselves faced with overhanging concern of issues such as *achievement gaps*, or disparities between racially- and ethnically-minoritized youth and their white counterparts, frequently theorized as being moderated by socio-economic status (Porter, 2007). We have sat and listened to white individuals discussing these achievement gaps with admirable passion and concern, and heard time and time again, "Okay, the measures include cultural biases, but they predict meaningful outcomes, according to our standards of development and our definitions of academic success." We cannot present a solidified, fool-proof answer to this question, but we offer all of our own unanswered questions presented in this paper, instead, as guidelines for future research. As an offering, we also deliver a question that we almost

assuredly know the answer to: Well, what if the entire system, and all of its standards, accordingly, are biased, too?

The answer we propose, then, is creation. Fitting with Chang et al.'s, (2016) description of the goals of CAE, we uphold CAE as an anti-colonialist tool which has helped to reshape our image of research, allowed for targeted, meaningful self-reflection, and provided us with opportunity for understanding our world and the roles we play in it in a way that feels novel, to us. In this paper, we identify self-exploration and related growth as opportunities related to friendship that are worthy of gratitude. For us, CAE served well as an extension of this. In thinking about future research avenues, we hold these benefits center, and consider the utility of this methodology in highlighting the value of experiences of students-of-color in graduate study, as well as girls-of-color participating in K-12 education.

We also hope to contribute to a much-larger pool of desire-based research and encourage exploration of the successes of women- and girls-of-color, and how we perform when provided with the opportunity to learn amongst our peers, as we have been afforded the opportunity to do. We hope for and we dream of further research founded in intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 2018/1989), focusing on our unique needs, and the ways that friendship and togetherness meet these needs. We call for research that explores how we perform when our needs are met in the way that we have described, or how students-of-color in graduate study perform when allowed to function inside of cohorts inclusive of additional students-of-color, as opposed to being invited to the table, one at a time, and expected to perform at our best in relative isolation. We ask for research that explores how we perform when provide with space, when provided with safety,

when provided with unconditional positive regard and room for practice, affirmation, and *love*. The greatest of these is love[10], indeed!

This seems to be the simplest conclusion of all. We love each other. We love each other as no one else loves us, because we see each other as no one else sees us. We are entitled to this love, as all Black and brown women and girls are, as all people are. And with love available, in excess, as it is when we are together—and we are *always* together, even when we are not—we have created everything presented in these pages.

We conclude our research as we presented it—absent of defense, but full of love.

[10] (1 Corinthians 13:13 New International Version)

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